

# RATIONAL EXPLANATION : MAGIC AND BUNGLED ACTIONS

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By  
PREETI

*to the*

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis 'Rational Explanation: Magic and Bungled Actions' submitted by Preeti in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, is a record of bonafide research under my administrative supervision. It has not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Preeti has satisfactorily completed all the course requirements for the M. Phil. programme in Philosophy. The courses include:

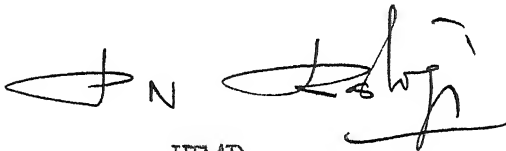
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TO

MY TEACHERS

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## ABSTRACT

Rational Explanation: Magic and Bungled Actions

Man is born with an insatiable thirst and a deep curiosity to learn the mind and matter that surrounds him. The function of learning, understanding and explaining continually in process in all human beings. The moment one comes across phenomena, whether it be in the social, psychological natural, ethical or any other field, which seems to be inaccessible then unable to be satisfied the intrigue sharpens.

In this dissertation we will make a study of two seemingly irrational phenomena which prick our curiosity and heighten our desire to know about them. These being, magic and bungled actions in history.

In the first chapter the problem 'as to whether the seemingly irrational can be amenable in rational terms or not' poses itself. As this problem is directly related to the concepts of rationality and explanation, a brief discussion of these two notions will be looked into.

The second chapter in the philosophy of anthropology comprises of a discussion on magic; a social phenomena, which loomed large in the primitive cultures, but traces of which are found even today, in our present day modern

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world. 'Can this seemingly irrational act be explained rationally?' This will be our topic of concern in the second chapter. Various views have been adduced by different social anthropologists. We have made a study of Frazers' theory of magic, Functionalism and Beattie's view that magic is basically symbolic and observe that none can stand on closer scrutiny. PeterWinch has also been brought into account but his arguments also cannot stand in the heat of criticism produced against them. It is the logic of situation that has been able to explain magic satisfactorily.

In the third chapter we will deal with the philosophy of history. The problem selected to be discussed is of yet another seemingly irrational phenomena. These are bungled actions in history; actions which do not attain their coveted goals but end e up , in a muddled up consequence due to the misappraisal of the agent, involved in the problem situation. A few historical explanation presented by different social scientists have been brought into consideration, but those could not successfully explained bungled actions in history,due to their own shortcomings. Bringing into account Watkins' Imperfect Rationality Principle in the context of the logic of situation, we have tried to explain that bungled actions

are not unintelligible.

Thus both irrational phenomena ; magic, in the field of social anthropology, and bungled actions in history can be explained in terms of the logic of situation.

## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM POSES ITSELF

This dissertation is a conceptual investigation into the problem which relates partly to philosophical anthropology and partly to philosophy of history. Broadly stating, the problem I propose to probe into is 'whether the seemingly irrational human behaviour can be amenable in rational terms or not'. Remote, unsuccessful events in history and apparently unintelligible practices adopted by the natives of certain cultures will be our main concern.

This inquiry is confined to the field of explanation in the social sciences and within that I shall be dealing chiefly with the problem of explanation of appearingly irrational social phenomena into its two different aspects. The selection is not arbitrary but has been made by force of the fact that one is a social phenomenon which has its effects on individuals of that particular society in which it is prevalent; namely magic. The other an individual phenomenon the consequences of which grip the whole human race directly or indirectly, closely or distantly; namely bungled actions in history.

The foregoing problems will be considered at some length under the rubric of rationality; a concept in the discussion of which social sciences have been variously but inescapably involved.

Two concepts that play the most seminal role in the development of this dissertation are that of 'rationality' and of 'explanation'. In what follows I shall discuss briefly the two notions.

Rationality is a crucial concept in the social sciences for one of the ways of explaining and predicting the behaviour of individuals and groups, is to exhibit the reasons they have or suppose themselves to have for their behaviour. A first step then in providing this type of explanation and prediction is to clarify the concept of rationality.

The concept of rationality in the social sciences is a confused one, signs of this being that rationality is used in many different senses by social scientists. It has often been taken as the typical difference between what have been termed 'primitive' and 'civilized' societies. Rationality acquires different connotations depending on what it is being opposed to. However, its exact connotation seems to undergo changes in the hands of different authors.

In what follows I shall set out a number of different definitions given with respect to 'rationality'. In doing so I make no claim to comprehensiveness.

Jonathan Bennett uses rationality to mean, that which demarcates human beings from the other species on the basis of their distinguished intellectual capacity. His analysis of rationality is to explore the content of the true belief that human beings are on a certain intellectual eminence compared with other terrestrial creatures. As he mentions in his book 'Rationality' this eminence is surrounded by a logical precipice and not by a gentle slope, the eminence being essentially connected with human linguistic ability.

Kant attributes human beings with a full scale rationality which places them on a higher plane compared to the rest. It is the capacity for making judgements or having beliefs, a quality exclusively <sup>it's</sup> ~~this~~ own.

Other efforts to present a reasonable picture of rationality have been made by Jarvie and Agassi. Thus we are told

By definition a rational action is one based on ... the actors' goals or aims, his present knowledge and beliefs. <sup>1</sup>

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1. Jarvie, I and J. Agassi, (1967) 'The Problems of the Rationality of Magic, Rationality Oxford Basil Blackwell, ed. Wilson, B. p - 173



In another place Jarvie states his position more clearly when he says almost in passing and in parenthesis

(for my part I accept the idea of goal-directedness as the criteria of rationality). 1

Mullick also brings into account the ends when she makes the twofold assumption regarding the concept of rational action. She is of the view

first that all action, all belief is related to some end; second that it is characterizable as rational or irrational only in relation to that end. 2

Later a shift in her position is evident when she notes

The claim I do make is that there is a sense in which the term 'rationality' is currently used which identifies it with intelligibility-via the notion of the rationale of doing things, the point of doing them. 2

Martin Hollis makes a strong claim that anthropology is only possible on the assumption that all societies are rational in precisely the way of western rational thought

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1. Jarvie, I:(1964):Revolution in Anthropology London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p-132.
  2. Mullick, M : (1975) On the Criteria of Rationality Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol.5, No.3, p-309.
  3. Mullick, M : Rationality Debate in Anthropology : A Reassessment. p-4

If anthropology is to be possible... the natives must share our concepts of truth, coherence and rational interdependence of beliefs... In other words Western rational thought is not just one species of rational thought nor rational thought just one species of thought.<sup>1</sup>

Thus all else as opposed to Western rational thinking was condemned as irrational.

Stephen Lukes sums up the various definitions of rationality in a nutshell,

there are... well used senses of 'rational' as applied to actions such as the widest sense of simply goal directed action; the sense in which an action is said to be (maximally) rational if what is in fact the most efficient means is adopted to achieve a given end; the sense in which an action is in fact conducive to the agents' (expressed or unexpressed) 'long term' ends; the sense in which the agents' ends are ends he ought to have. <sup>2</sup>

Definitions of rationality can be added ad nauseum as philosophical literature storms with matter on rationality. One must select almost arbitrarily a point at which to stop and take a stand.

Generally it is agreed by philosophers that a rational action is an action based upon the agents' aims or goals and upon his beliefs and knowledge at the time. I am inclined towards this generally agreed view but not totally. After having incorporated an element of

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1. Hollis, M : (1967) The Limits of Irrationality, Archives Europeenes de Sociologie VII, p-269.

2. Lukes, S : (1967) Some Problems about Rationality, Rationality Oxford, p-208.

criticism to it I will be in complete accord with it. Thus though goal directedness and conformity with beliefs and knowledge are necessary conditions for rational action they are not sufficient by themselves. A degree of critical consideration of the goals and the means to attain the goals will make the definition of rationality, I tend to support, complete. Thus rationality lies in choosing ones' course of action after a critical consideration of the knowledge, beliefs and aim in ones present circumstance. Now the question that poses itself sharply is 'cannot magic and bungled actions, which are often side stepped as irrational, be explained as rational or do they remain unexplained as residues of rational explanation. This is a crucial question and I shall be dealing with it in detail in the following chapters. The problem that strikes us immediately is that of explanation.

Stephen Lukes notes,

To explain something is (at least) to overcome an obstacle. To make what was unintelligible intelligible.

And as Dray puts it

The function of an explanation is to resolve puzzlement of some kind. 2

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1. Lukes, S : (1973) Methodological Individualism Reconsidered, The Philosophy of Social Explanation edi. Alan Ryan, Oxford, p-126.
  2. Dray, W: (1963) The Historical Explanation of Actions Reconsidered, Philosophy and History, edi. Sidney Hook NewYork, p-117.

He adds to the notion of explanation the idea of rationality too, and defines rational explanation as

Explanation which tries to establish a connection between beliefs motives and actions of the indicated sort. 1

Thus when an investigator sets out to resolve his puzzlement about a human action his problem is usually that he does not know what reason the agent had for doing it. To analyse the perplexing actions he seeks information about what the agent believed to be the facts of the situation, including the possible results of taking various courses of action considered open to him and what he wanted to accomplish: his purposes, goals or motives. Understanding is achieved when the investigator can see the reasonableness of mans' doing what this agent did, given the beliefs and purposes referred to; his action can then be explained as having been an appropriate one. A conceptual connection between understanding the mans' action and its rationale is brought out.

Thus to explain the phenomena in the world of our experience is to answer the question 'why' rather than only the question 'what' which is one of the foremost objectives of all rational inquiry and especially

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1. Ibid, p-117.

sociological research, in its various branches, strives to go beyond a mere description of its subject matter by providing an explanation of the phenomena it investigates.

A detailed discussion of explanation in the field of anthropology pertaining to magic and of bungled actions in the field of history will follow in the later chapters.

A wave came in the field of social sciences that its problems should be solved by carrying over the methods and techniques which have produced the celebrated triumphal march of science in the study of the nature and that this procedure will lead to a parallel triumph in our field in the yielding of knowledge. This idea is fallacious because the difference between men and non-human things entails a further difference between the study of men and the study of things. The actions of men as essentially involving thought and purpose, can not be understood by merely observing manifest behaviour. Each man is a unique individual and hence human action cannot be considered as completely subject to the causal uniformities governing the behaviour of matter. Hence the methods and goals of natural science should be deemed in-appropriate to the study of man and society.

Maurice Mandelbaum lays the distinction as

In the first place the concepts and methods utilized in the natural sciences have been more sharply defined than have been those which social scientists employ. In the second place there is less disagreement among natural scientists than among social scientists as to the purposes which actually do underlie, or which should underlie their studies. In the third place the relations among the various branches of natural science seem to be more easily definable and less subject to dispute than is the case among the social sciences. 1

Collingwood too believes in the impossibility of the science of man. For him any science of human nature if viewed on the model of natural science is open to two decisive objections. The first of these arises from his analysis of human action: every act which men perform, he asserts, has both an 'outside' and an 'inside' ; an internal and external dimension. External movements are physical movements describable by such concepts as duration, velocity, location and magnitude. But concepts of this sort hardly supply a complete identification of the action performed. The internal dimensions comprised of the agent's objectives, beliefs, attitudes and standards of conduct also demand hearing. According to Collingwood, for the events with which natural science is concerned

This distinction between ~~the~~ the outside and inside of an event does not arise. The events of nature are more events not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist

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1. Mandelbaun, M : (1973) Societal Facts, Philosophy of Social Explanation, Oxford, p-105.

endeavours to trace. 1

Scientific method as developed in chemistry or physics is thus incapable of

penetrating to the inside of events and detecting the thought which they express. 2

Any science of human nature employing this method will likewise be restricted to natural events, events which lack an internal dimension. It will thus alienate itself from what is most distinctive about human agents, and yield an understanding of their conduct which is necessarily and permanently incomplete.

The most fundamental aim of the method of natural science is to discover what ~~Skinner~~ Skinner calls 'Uniformities' and what Mill refers to as 'constant laws' and 'laws of unerring uniformity'. But scientific uniformities or laws, like those connecting the volume, temperature and pressure of gases must have universal scope. They cannot hold merely for England from the reign of Elizabeth I to that of Victoria or for India during the reign of Akbar. On the contrary to be considered as laws

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1. Collingwood, R.G. :(1946) The Idea of History, Oxford University Press, NewYork. p-210

2. Ibid, p-211

at all they must hold for every time and place for any historical period or social order. Thus methods of natural science cannot be imported in social science for any study of human behaviour. However wide, its scope, will never be more than a generalized description of certain phases in human history and a limited space. This means that any such study will lack a crucial feature of the natural sciences, i.e. universally applicable laws.

Thomas McPherson notes in his book 'Social Philosophy' that we cannot understand a society unless we understand what people in it mean by the concepts they use and no amount of empirical study can tell us this.

Prof. Chomsky argues in his 'Language and Mind' that the so called behavioural sciences have only contrived to mimic the surface features of the physical sciences; they can detect the regularities of outward behaviour but cannot account for its interior logic and organization.

Prof. Winch claims that social scientists are prone to misunderstanding their own practice; they think wrongly that the kind of explanation they are concerned to give are exactly like those which natural scientists are concerned to give.

Thus we come to realize that between the natural sciences and the social sciences there is a difference not of degree of complexity but of kind. The idea of unifying



the social sciences as one branch of a unified science of nature is in principle mistaken. The notion of human society involves concepts which are logically incompatible with the kind of explanation offered in the natural sciences. Having ruled out the possibility of importing the methods of explanation of natural sciences into social sciences we shall look steadfastly at the wide spectra of explanations offered by different social scientists of human behaviour; behaviour that is changing, fluid and evanescent. 1

and hence making great demands on the ingenuity of the scientists. How far could the various explanations meet with success in explaining human behaviour that was seemingly irrational will be evident in the two following chapters.

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1. Skinner, B.F.: (1953) Science and Human Behaviour, The Macmillan Company, p-13.

## CHAPTER II

RATIONAL EXPLANATION AND MAGIC

Certain primitive Yoruba carry about with them boxes covered with cowrie shells which they treat with special regard. When asked what they are doing they apparently reply that the boxes are their heads or souls and that they are protecting them against witchcraft. 1

What a practice soaked with an element of mystery !

A child of eight, dressed in her best excitedly elbowing in and out of a strangely silent crowd, was caught hold of and corded to her husbands pyre... seen her bewildered terror-stricken wide eyes and wild heart rending shrieks were absorbed in the furious galloping flames.

A cold answer, 'Its the custom,' is flung to pacify the aghast, 'why ?'

Eating ones' enemys' brain or dodging out of the way of an approaching sister; offering ones' own wife for the pleasure of the guest; possession of human heads as status symbols; treating stick or stone as the embodiment of ones soul and carrying it around; never

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1. Hollis, Martin: (1967) Reason and Ritual, Rationality Oxford, p-221.

parting with beloved's lock of hair'; impaling with pins or melting in fire a wax model of an enemy; sacrificing human beings to idols.

Strange as they seem to us, what do such <sup>actions</sup> ~~as~~ amount to ? What do these seemingly irrational actions imply ? Question marks looming large close up round the bewildered on-looker.

An alien society with a culture of its own is what makes a stranger of one who is away from home. It includes all these beliefs and expectations about how people should speak and act which becomes a kind of second nature as a result of social learning. When one is with members of a group who share his culture one does not have to think about it, for they all view the world in much the same way and all know what to expect of one another. However, first exposure to an alien society usually produces a disturbing feeling of disorientation and helplessness; a state of culture shock. In general the <sup>more</sup> exotic the alien society, and the deeper ones' immersion in its social life, the greater the shock. Ones' customary categories of experience are no longer useful and habitual actions elicit seemingly bizarre responses.

An anthropologist who sets himself to study a culture, which is not his own, can hope to succeed when

he understands everything the natives say, do and, believe  
 In what follows I intend discussing a philosophical  
 problem stemming out from the practice of anthropologists  
 and sociologists which may be stated as : 'when one  
 comes across a magical activity which appears at first  
 sight to be irrational, what attitude should the social  
 scientist adopt towards it?'

In this chapter in the philosophy of anthropology  
 I will be dealing chiefly with an anthropological phenomenon  
 namely magic. It is seriously maintained in some  
 intellectual quarters that magic cannot be understood in  
 rational terms and that it is irrational. In what follows  
 I will discuss the problem of its explanation. Can a  
 rational explanation of magic be given ? If not, must  
 it be condemned as irrational, remaining a residue of  
 explanation.

The problem of explanation of magic acquires  
 special significance for the social scientists, in view of  
 the fact, that despite its apparant ineffectiveness people  
 believe and practice it without either noticing its  
 ineffectiveness or even attempting to test it as they test  
 their other practical attempts.

Human action is always motivated by some underline  
 force with some aim in view. Is it just possible that  
 there is no point in performing the magical activities?<sup>2</sup>  
 If so, then what do these actions signify ?

A host of answers have been provided by anthropologists and philosophers in respect to primitive magical beliefs and practices. From Tylor and Frazer to Evans Pritchard and Beattie anthropologists have been trying to explain this problem. Functionalism, for example, tried to avoid the possible insult to the prestige of those who practice magic by announcing the rationale of magic to lie in its social function. Frazer avoided it by declaring the practitioners to be doing science though rather crudely. Beattie lays emphasis on the fact that magic is essentially symbolic, having its rationale in the aptness of the symbol to the value symbolized. Thus different thinkers have given their own accounts.

We begin our discussion with the well known theory of Sir George Frazer as his account of magic instigated the later anthropologists to react strongly against him. Roughly stating, his theory goes like this: The primitives take to the magical act because they erroneously believe that, that act will bring about the coveted effect. Spells are thrown invoking things to happen, dances of enactment are performed because it is thought that they have the power of bringing about the desired results. Magical acts are the consequences of false beliefs that assume:

...first that by imitating the desired effect you can produce it, and second, that things which have once been in contact can influence each other when they are separated just as if the contact still persisted. 1

The major components of Frazer's theory are the two laws he propounds about magic. They are (1) the law of similarity or homeopathic magic resting on the idea that 'like produces like' or that 'effect resembles its cause', and (2) the law of contagion or contact magic which is actually imitative of the former. Thus according to Frazer, when hunters enact the chase or the warriors the victory, they do it because they believe this will bring about the desired end. Those who practice magic bring into use things that resemble one another. For example, gold in homeopathic magic is a magical cure for jaundice. The contagious magic on the other hand employs things that had once been in contact with <sup>the</sup> person who is the object of the magical spell. The practitioner uses such things as a bit of hair, a nail clipping, a shred of cloth, or even the dust the individual had trodden on. In both the magics <sup>there is</sup> the error is the same; the practitioner in either case is a sufferer from misplaced faith in the association of ideas. The believer considers for instance that with the correct invocation the thought enactment of victory or the thought wish for illness to strike is sufficient to bring about victory or illness.

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1. Frazer, J.G. : (1922) The Golden Bough, Abridged edition Macmillan, London, p-12.

According to Frazer, the misplaced faith, which is the basic error of the practitioners of magic is not incidental. Magic is an essential part of their whole cosmology; their theory of the universe. Frazer's account of magic as a complete theory of universe tries to explain on the one hand, as to why magic has such widespread appeal and grasp; On the other hand it seems to make magic more agreeable to the mind of the present day man by according it the status of a world view similar to the world view of science. The latter point would be better appreciated if we consider it in the context of Frazer's evolutionary account of 'magic-to-~~religion-to-science~~ religion-to-science.' According to him, human thought has evolved from magical stage to the present day scientific stage through the intermediary stage of religious thought. Each of these stages constitute distinct world views. The magical stage is, though placed lower to the religious nevertheless, it has according to Frazer the form similar to the scientific stage. Religion, he holds, gives free will to the universe and robs man of his manipulative power whereas magic like science views the universe as a system that can be predicted and manipulated.

According to Frazer's reconstruction of the evolution primitive men, in the beginning, considered the world as being commanded by mystical forces and his magic

was an attempt to handle them. When that attempt proved to be futile the resultant disorderliness thrust him to anthropomorphism, nurturing in him the belief that the disorder was caused by gods who had to be appeased. Finally the superstitions and anthropomorphic world views gave way to a stable conception of the universe supported by freshly refined and experimented notions of empirical science. Thus, Frazer holds, that though religion has an explanatory intent, it is very feeble and logically defective. He sees magic, religion and science as three competing systems, one of which is logically defective (namely religion) while the other is factually defective (namely magic). Evans Pritchard paraphrases Frazer's standpoint in his observation

(Frazer) considered that primitive man had reached his conclusions about the efficacy of magic from rational observation and deduction in much the same way as men of science reach their conclusions about natural laws. Underlying all ritual is a rational process of thought. The ritual of magic follows from its ideology. It is true that the deductions of a magician are false- had they been true they would have been scientific and not magical- but they are nevertheless based on genuine observation. For classification of phenomena by the similarities which exist between them is the procedure of science as well as of magic and is the first essential process of human knowledge. Where the magician goes wrong is in inferring that because things are alike in one or more respects, they have a mystical link between them whereas in fact the link is not a real link but an ideal connection in the mind of the magician... A causal relationship exists in his mind but not in nature. It is subjective and not an objective connection. Hence the savage mistakes an ideal analogy for a real connection. 1

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1. Pritchard, E.E. Evans: (1965) The Intellectualist Interpretation of Magic, Theories of Primitive Religion, Oxford, p - 63



Thus Frazer regards the fundamental conception of magic to be identical '

...with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm in the order and uniformity of nature. 1

The flaw of magic, however, he further observes,

...lies not in its general assumption of a succession of events determined by law but in its total misconception of the nature of the particular laws which govern that succession. 2

Thus in Frazer's view magical beliefs are largely rational in method purpose and form though unscientific and more or less irrational in content. The underlying criterion of rationality here is approximation to the coherence and predictive powers of natural science.

After an elaboration of Frazer's theory of magic we see that his evolutionary scheme is most unconvincing. Quite often it is seen that magic, religion and science coexist side by side in the same society. This makes it difficult to believe that any one of them has succeeded or preceded any other. Equally problematic is his idea that though the magical and the scientific world views are similar in their logic yet in their evolutionary sequence, the two are mediated by a world view which is radically different from the two. How can a certain kind

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1. Frazer, J.G. : (1957) p-64.

2. Ibid, p-64.

of thinking having given way in its evolutionary process to an entirely different kind of thinking reassert itself. Frazer's evolutionery account is highly conjectural and unmindful of the conceptual issues relating to it.

Now, to come to his views on magic, which is our main concern. Frazer does not succeed in showing that belief in magic is less defensible than belief in science. Moreover it is not clear that all magic is either homeopathic or contagious as he seems to have believed. To provide a theory explaining why belief in one is more defensible than belief in the other, he would have to take a somewhat more sophisticated view of scientific thinking. He simply endorses a naive view of science as an accumulated mass of empirical observations from which theories have somehow to be squeezed. A more polished view of science should have been forwarded by Frazer because so much of his arguments turns on comparison and contrast between magic, science and religion.

Tom Settle observes that Frazer's ...

account of rationality of magic may be said to insult the intelligence of its practitioners. It damns with faint praise: belief in magic is slightly rational since magic enjoys slight inductive support. If No magic maker... would welcome, or even allow use of such criterion of rationality. <sup>1</sup>

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1. Settle, Tom : (1971) The Rationality of Science versus the Rationality of Magic, Philosophy of Social Science, Vol.I, Great Britain, p-183.

Frazer's claim of magic as an inductive device was meant to be complimentary rather than insulting, since it proclaimed practitioners of magic to be rational in the same sense in which scientists and technologists are rational- only mistaken in their specific hypothesis of cause and effect. Here the question arises that if the primitive man practised induction as well as Frazer claims, how is it that science did not advance in primitive cultures, if induction is how science advances. Induction cannot be such a successful guide to truth in science if it succeeds in fortifying what Frazer regarded as a set of false and nonsensical beliefs. If induction explains how such beliefs become fortified then it is highly doubtful as to whether induction could lead to the growth of knowledge. By claiming that primitive magic is soundly based on induction, Frazer makes it impossible to account for the growth of knowledge in modern science, which too, according to him, is based on induction. How does the same method yield in one case irrational content or beliefs and rational beliefs or content in the other. If induction is indeed used in both kind of cultures, some other factor must account for their diversity; and it would be this other factor rather than induction that should be regarded as crucial to the rationality of science. Thus if some other element is needed to explain the difference in rates of growth, it is not a compliment to declare primitives to be inductivists.

Thus the foregoing discussion on Frazer's theory of magic portrays it as a bold and exciting theory which does not find favour among the present day social scientists.

The functionalists unlike Frazer, consider magic as satisfying certain latent drives and thus performing a stabilizing function in the magic practicing societies.

Malinowski is one of the chief exponents of this doctrine, which largely consists in the functional analysis of culture. By culture, Malinowski means a distinct way of life of a people; something which consist in the unique combination of social organization, religion, language, ~~the~~ economy, polity, art and so on, existing in only one space time area. The functionalist analysis of culture sets out to find the functional relationships between the parts of a whole culture and thence to explain it as a coherent system. It is assumed that every custom, object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function, some task which sustains its continuance as a part of the working whole, that is culture,. Clearly the functionalist theory is incompatible with the evolutionary theory of Frazer, for it concerns itself only on illuminating the way one institution is related to, or influences other parts of the system of institutions, Not bringing into account history. ~~Ex~~

As Agassi points out

Functionalism is a sociological-anthropological version of relativism; not each to his own faith, but each to his own customs. Each custom functionalism says, should be viewed from within and indeed seen as natural. 1

Ernest Gellner who was basically of the same view sees functionalism in a slightly different light.

The essence of functionalism is perhaps the stress on content (rather than origin or overt motive) in the explanation of overt behaviour. Formulated as an extreme doctrine, it asserts that each social institution is ideally suited to its content. The paradigm of explanation then becomes an account of just how a given institution does ideally fit its content which means presumably just how it serves the survival and stability of the whole better than would any available alternative.

Gellner argues that the rationality found in simple societies and in modern western societies shows considerable convergence. Institutions may be socially effective and powerful precisely for the reason that they are not strictly rational. Even in the advanced societies there is some willingness to credit the non-rational with this type of power. A religious system deals in such power and the religious may not seek analysis of it by purely rational procedures. If the Sociologist were to insist on imposing categories of rationality to judge belief systems, he might from

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1. Agassi, J : (1977) Towards a Rational Philosophical Anthropology, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, p-266.
  2. Gellner, E : (1968) Concepts and Society, Rationality Oxford, p-20.

certain point of view blind himself to the social and psychological operation and the potency of non-rational. Thus Gellner explains the significance of religious and magical beliefs in terms of their psychological power and socially effective function even though they embody statements that are rarely true and exhort conduct which is not by modern standards rational. Concepts are not always rigorous and precise, and do not always carry well defined meanings. They may indeed be important precisely because of the strategic ambiguities that they embrace. Thus functionalism professes that the non-rational has a function to perform. Though magic is non-rational yet it has a function to perform.

Criticizing the hermeneutic principle of Evans Pritchard, Gellner notes,

It is worth considering just why the principle is so indiscriminately charitable... The hermeneutic principle tacitly employed by Evans Pritchard is too strong for it ensures that no reasonably viable society can be said to be based on or to uphold absurd or pre-logical doctrines. The trouble with such all-embracing charity is, for one thing, that it is unwittingly quite a priori it may delude anthropologists into thinking that they have found that no society upholds absurd or self-contradictory beliefs whilst in fact the principle employed has ensured in advance of any inquiry that nothing may count as pre-logical, inconsistent or categorically absurd though it may be. And this apart from anything else would blind one to at least one socially significant phenomenon: the social role of absurdity. <sup>1</sup>

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1. Gellner, E : (1968) , p-36.

Functionalism is thus an approach that studies the 'non-rational' behaviour by reference to the not so 'irrational' 'hidden-hand' by which all things work to sustain each other.

Traditionally, evolutionists and particularly Frazer held that magic is a primitive form of science embodying causal theories and empirical apparatus. Malinowski denies this similarity between magic and science claiming that magic is not primitive science, but rather a system whose function is to strengthen belief and enhance tradition and substantiate morals. 1. Malinowski's argument here is ambiguous for it is not clear how his functional view contradicts with the view that magical myths are primitive science. Primitive science can strengthen belief, substantiate morals and enhance tradition, such effects being part of the social functions of science. Malinowski asserts that magic explains what the natives cannot control. Science too sometimes explains what we cannot control or understand. If so then one simply has to admit that in some respects magic ~~is~~<sup>is</sup> ~~irresponsible~~/primitive science, its social function being similar.

Commenting on the functionalist methodological assumption that every part of an organization has a

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1. ~~E~~ See Malinowski, B : (1929) Social Anthropology, Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 20, p.p. 862-70.

certain function to perform, Jarvie observes in his book Revolution in Anthropology that present day man who stands at the highest step of the evolutionary ladder has in his body some non-functional survivals, as for instance the tailbone and the appendix. Following from this there is reason to suppose that society which is regarded as living, metaphorically, also may be containing uneliminated redundant parts which remain on account of being harmless. Hence for all we know, there may be some institution still surviving without any social significance.

Similarly, Joan Smith argues that

functionalism has inherent flaws as either a context of inquiry or a specific structure of empirical propositions, so that as a method it is a behavioural impossibility and, as a theory, it negates the possibility of the very items of the social world which are addressed by it.

A strongly current alternative is the symbolist approach, which explains magic by its essential expressiveness. Its chief exponent is John Beattie. He is of the view that beliefs associated with ritual are essentially expressive and symbolic. Magic for him is the acting out of a situation, the expression of a desire in symbolic terms. Ritual actions are not either simply irrational or pseudo-rational, based on pre-scientific erroneous knowledge, but are of a different

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1. Smith, Joan : (1975) The Failure of Functionalism, Philosophy of the Social Sciences, vol.5, No.1, p-33.



character altogether. Beattie notes,

... the sensible student of myth, magic and religion will... be well advised to recognise that their tenets are not scientific propositions, based on experience and on a belief in the uniformity of nature, and that they cannot be adequately understood as if they were. Rather, ~~many~~ as symbolic statements, they are to be understood by a delicate investigation of... the kinds of symbolic classifications which they imply. 1

For Beattie magic and religion,

... both imply ritual, symbolic ideas and activities rather than practical 'scientific' ones. 2

Beattie's general theory of beliefs and values seeks to add an extra dimension to the usual view that these are factors which affect peoples selection of means and ends. Beattie puts it down,

It was easy for the Victorian to assume that such thinking as they did was simple and 'childish'; a very inferior version of their own. The intensive fieldwork which was to provide an intimate understanding of simpler people's way of life and so to demonstrate the superficiality and inadequacy of such views, had not begun... so there was no way in which they could have known better... Only with the development of intensive fieldwork... the subtlety, complexity and, often profoundety of the ways of thought of pre-literate people began to be adequately understood. 3

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1. Beattie, J : (1964) Other Cultures, London, p-72.
  2. Ibid, p-212.
  3. Ibid, p-67.

Thus for Beattie as opposed to Frazer belief systems are far from being childish, nor are they as Benjamin Franklin had asserted savagery or revolting and sub-human. Beattie notes that Evans Pritchard showed in his book on Azande that

... the beliefs of this highly intelligent people... are not... a set of weird and irrational delusions about occult ~~for~~ forces, but rather... a mode of adjustment to the strains and frustrations of everyday life which, in the whole context of Zande culture, appears as eminently practical and sensible. 1

Beattie laid the view that in most non-scientific cultures most thinking about the world is of a symbolic character. Abstract notions such as power, political authority etc. are symbolized and hence, notes Beattie that for the purposes of Social Anthropology, the first thing is to determine with clarity what we are to mean by the term symbol. He notes,

symbolism is a kind of language... symbolism is essentially expressive, it is a way of saying something important, something which it is impossible or impracticable to say directly. 2

Beattie gave insistence to the fact that perfectly intelligible meaning can be read into the symbolism of magic and hoped that imputation of meaning to magic will

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1. Ibid, p-67.

2. Ibid, p-71.

defend primitive people against Frazer's charge of backwardness and irrationality.

In his explanation of magic Beattie makes use of a distinction between 'instrumental' and 'expressive' aspects of human behaviour. He is of the view that it is instrumental to grow crops or kill ones' enemy but expressive while doing so to chant spells or impale the wax model of enemy with pins or melt it. To the question as to how are we to identify the symbolic element in behaviour, Beattie draws a distinction between 'instrumental' and 'expressive' aspects of human behaviour.

Instrumental activity is directed to bringing about some desired state of affairs; it is oriented towards an end. Expressive activity is a way of saying or expressing something; usually some idea or state of mind. The instrumental aspect of any activity is understood by seeing what it is aimed at; its expressive aspect by understanding what is being said. 1

According to Beattie, the rationale for a magical act does not lie in its supposed effectiveness, but rather in the appropriateness of the symbol as an expression of what it is supposed to express. Frazer thought that people practicing imitative magic do so because they believe that by imitating a desired effect they can produce it. Beattie, by contrast, thinks people imitated desired effects because it is,

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1. Ibid, p-71.

an appropriate way of saying what has to be said. 1

Beattie goes further to assert that often magical activities are believed to be instrumental (causally effective) just because they are expressive. But this is a problematic definition, for Beattie admits,

Although magic is magic because it is essentially expressive and symbolic the people who use it think of it as instrumental. 2

Now, since he has identified instrumentality with causal effectiveness and since he views primitive technology as causally effective, convincing us that practitioners know how to learn by trial and error, Beattie gets trapped in a problem as to how people still believe in magical practices without being aware of its ineffectiveness or make an attempt to test it by empirical methods as the practical techniques are tested. To this Beattie answers simply that there is no need to do so for magic is essentially expressive. But neither Beattie nor anyone else claims that practitioners of magic believe magic to be essentially expressive. It is the visiting anthropologist and not the natives who think magic to be essentially symbolic. The natives who make magic manifest

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1. Ibid, p-204.

2. Ibid, p-204.

do so, because they believe it to be causally effective. From the practitioners view point then there would be a point in testing magical techniques empirically, if their effectiveness were in doubt. But it is not so except for a few limited cases as in the field of medicine. Besides this another point that strikes is that expressiveness does not pick out magic from non-magic. Many non-magical acts are very expressive. As Settle points out

Body language is often more genuinely expressive of an emotion or an intention than a spoken utterance. <sup>1</sup>

Magic has thus to be distinguished from non-magic in some other way.

As Jarvie and Agassi have criticised Beattie on his twofold theory of magic that there cannot be two theories of rationality, one that applies to instrumental actions and the other that applies to symbolic actions.<sup>2</sup> ~~XX~~ At this juncture, they say, Beattie has taken advantage of both. He tries to impress that magic is not a case of a goal-directed rational action but it is rational on some other criterion, but on that criteria of rationality those actions are also proved rational which are goal

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1. Settle, Tom : (1971), p-185.

2. See Jarvie and Agassi (1966) The problem of Rationality of Magic, The British Journal of Sociology, no.1, 1967. p - 181

directed.

To consider Beattie's equation when applied to acts regularly observed in different societies such as celebrating a wedding, standing overnight in a queue, sowing crops, making canoes and weapons etc. These acts will be accepted as rational only if they express some social meaning. Here the absurdity is evident when we realize that we cannot explain queuing or the sowing of seeds unless and until their goal is mentioned how so ever expressive the act may be. Here the question that poses itself is: does Beattie's readings of social value into the symbolism of magic succeed in giving a rational explanation of why people perform magic ? Is there a difference between acts whose social meaning is understood and ones whose social meaning is not ? Beattie's answer to this will be in negative. He is prepared to see magic as rational even though the participants are not aware of the significance of what they are doing. He himself has accepted that the whole society is not aware of the importance of what they symbolize although it is likely that ~~the whole society is not aware~~ in most societies at least some of the actors will be more or less aware of some of the social implication of their ritual institutions. With the two standards of rationality; instrumental and symbolic it is difficult to imagine any act as being irrational. If there is a

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distinction between understanding and not understanding the social meaning of ones' action then those who do not understand the social meaning of what they are doing must be due to some other misunderstanding. It could be as Jarvie and Agassi exemplify that they

... do not perform canoe magic because of the social importance of canoe building but because they think it will help them achieve some end they themselves are not aware of. 1

Even if the symbolist view is true the interpretation of symbolism is entirely arbitrary. Beattie's interpretation of the symbolic thinking of the magician simply involves reading a statement into an act. This is highly problematic. In the West and other more modern societies one is familiar with acts as statements such as a flag semaphore, or the convention of ballet etc. Both conventions are quite arbitrary but their meaning is intentional. There are a few universal gestures such as smiles, tears etc. but even these too cannot be grasped out of context. When actions with consciously intended meanings are difficult to interpret much more problematic is the reading of meaning into actions which are not intentionally meaningful. Hence Beattie's account does not stand on closer scrutiny.

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1. Jarvie and Agassi: (1966), p-63.

As a firm reaction against the view that magic is irrational has come the theory advocated by Peter Winch that seemingly irrational belief systems in primitive societies are to be interpreted as rational. According to Winch when an observer is faced with seemingly irrational beliefs in a primitive society, he should seek contextually given criteria for their understanding and appraisal. Winch believes that beliefs that appear to be irrational can be re-interpreted as rational in the light of the criterion of rationality to be discovered in the culture in which they operate. He states,

Judgements are intelligible only relatively to a given mode of human behaviour governed by its own rules. <sup>1</sup>

Winch would agree that anthropologists have always struggled to make understandable, beliefs, we do not share i.e. beliefs held by others such as magical beliefs. This involves giving an account of them which satisfies our scientific cultures' criteria of rationality or intelligibility. Sometimes we find ourselves studying beliefs that are not true yet they are believed to be

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1. Winch, Peter : (1958) The Idea of a Social Science, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p-84.



true by the culture we study. Winch would contend that the last sentence is illegitimate, that it cannot be intelligible. In Winch's view the words 'not true' and 'true' either belong to two quite separate universes of discourse; ours and theirs, or they both belong to ours and are not applicable to the beliefs which do not belong to our universe of discourse. But our universe of discourse cannot appraise other universes of discourse or appraise itself as the only true universe of discourse. Reality is built into a universe of discourse and the outcome of a question about it in another cannot be appraised in the first. Winch gives an example from religion what God's reality amounts to can only be seen from the religious tradition in which the concept of God is used. Winch is not here declaring that only the religious can handle and discuss religious concepts, unlike religious people who claim this, Winch nowhere says there is anything to stop the non-believer coming fully to grasp and being able to play the religious language game. It can hardly be a rule of a game that sincerity of belief is required even though display of sincerity may be required in ritual fashion. The ability to properly play it shows the understanding of it

Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has. 1

For Winch there is no external or objective reality against which to measure a universe of discourse. According to him

Understanding is grasping the point or meaning of what is being done or said. It is closer to the realm of discourse and to the internal relations that link the parts of a realm of discourse-use. 2

Assuming that Winch thinks there is an external reality, discussion about it cannot take place within the universe of discourse. This is true of the universe of discourse of science, as well as that of magic. Science exists in a cultural context outside of which the actions and statements which constitute it would not make sense. Those who do not play its game can hardly appraise its theories or experiments; those who can play the game cannot use the game to appraise itself. Thus Winch in a passage, that he himself describes as seminal to his thesis, notes:

Criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of and are only intelligible in the context of ways

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1. Ibid, p-8

2. Ibid, p-9.

of living or modes of social life. It follows that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such. For instance science is one such mode, and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself. 1

The question arises what stand would Winch adopt to the question whether modern cultures' physiological explanation of a mans' death is nearer to the truth or the Zande magical one. Whereas on the one hand, modern explanation comes from an open and critical intellectual system in which ideas about the world are constantly scrutinized and revised to meet these criticisms, on the other hand Zande magic is part of a closed and unrevisable system of beliefs which may have been that way for a long time. The issue under consideration is not whether magic or physiology truly explain the death but whether the choice between an open and a closed world view can be rationally argued. Here Winch's view seems to be that the question cannot be rationally argued because there are different standards of rationality embedded in each position and we could only decide the issue if one side was allowed to impose its standards on the other.

Jarvie in his book Concepts and Society disagrees

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1. Ibid, p-100.

with Winch. He holds that there is something like a community of rationality shared by all men, but recognised or fostered by different societies in varying degrees. This rationality consists at the very least in learning from experience and especially from mistakes. All the ethnography turns up no people, however primitive, who do not in some matters learn from their mistakes. The minimum standard is thus ever present even though seldom acknowledged. Those unaware of having it could have it disclosed to them that they possessed it by outsiders, like white men for instance. Self discovery is also possible. Their closed system of ideas comes into contact with another closed system of different ideas. Suddenly for the first time there is the shock of choice: another view of the world is possible. Once this is realized, to accept either becomes difficult, since there could even be a third or a fourth view also. It would not then be an unreasonable conclusion to decide that whatever world view is chosen it had better be held tentatively in case some better alternative crops up.

Overlap of standards is important because in overlap may lie the seeds of appraisal and change whereas Winch's view freezes them with their contemporary standards unable to appraise and revise them.

There is a large class of serious but curable cases where traditional practices and modern medicines come into direct conflict and the former is rejected as false. It is a matter of empirical fact that in most parts of the world when this is put to practical test the population opts for the modern medicine. This may be because the modern medicines can often propose and then carry out crucial experiments. This suggests that standards of rationality have a certain universal component. Thus the preference for modern medicine for the primitives is a refutation of Winch's thesis that a culture accepts its own ideas as true; that it would be utterly lost and bewildered without them and therefore cannot judge them against others. Whenever a culture can adapt itself to new ideas, and implement them into its way of life Winch's view does not hold.

Winch's whole view presupposes totally separate ways of life which enable their members to live untroubled within their system of ideas and brush off all contact with the rest of the world. Long ago it might have been the case, now it is not. No culture is a closed system. Poppers' model of the closed society probably never was actualized and certainly is not now. And since they are not seamless the possibility for

contrast and self-appraisal always exists. Constant acquaintance with alternative sets of concepts and ways of classifying the world tends to shatter a lot of ones own preconceptions. The bizarre ceases to be bizarre and a degree of self awareness about ones' own culture and society is gained which only the greatest of imaginative leaps can otherwise obtain.

If evaluative standards of different societies were incommensurable there would be and could be no social science indeed no history either. After all history is the attempt to explain the past in terms of the present. We cannot explain medieval plague without reference to medieval ideas of disease and hygiene. In history we, in a way, attempt to explain and evaluate the beliefs institutions of another time. As one explores further into the past of ones culture or country the gap becomes larger between them and us. Yet we do not stop ourselves at some point and say we cannot criticize e.g. ~~whi~~ witchcraft, because what its reality amounts to can be seen only from the tradition in which the concepts of <sup>witch-</sup>~~which~~ craft are prevalent. Similarly in our contemporary society we may not be able to explain actions without pointing out the falsity of the beliefs on which they were based. If we can appraise a past state of affairs of our own society and segments of our

own society today then we can do it to others also.

All this seems obvious enough yet Winch flies in the face of it. He maintains in his book that understanding a society is a kind of conceptual empathy which imprison one in a universe of discourse that cannot evaluate itself.

Hollis claims

... the only way to produce justifiable accounts of other cultures is to make the natives as rational as possible. 1

From this he concludes that

relativism far from being a due recognition of the scope of empirical science, makes anthropology theoretically impossible. 2

Ernest Gellner appears to be on the same side as Hollis when he argues that

It is no use... claiming that the indigenous societies always live, as it were, in a conceptual dimension of their own in which our catagorical boundaries do not apply. On the contrary we can sometimes only make sense of the society in question by seeing how the manipulation

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1. Hollis, M : (1967) The Limits of Irrationality, Archives Europeenes de Sociologie VII, p-270.

2. Ibid, p-271.

of concepts and the violation of categorical boundaries helps it to work. 1

MacIntyre also comes close to this view in rejecting Winch's claim. He notes

Explaining actions is explaining choices, and explaining choices is exhibiting why certain criteria define rational behaviour for a given society. To this we must now add that the beginning of an explanation of why certain criteria are taken to be rational in some societies is that they are (*italics his*) rational. And since this has to enter into our explanation we cannot explain social behaviour independently of our own norms of rationality. 2

Thus we see that Winch's position has generated a great deal of controversy, and after having done so false flat.

After the tedious journey that has been undertaken via the winding routes to inquire conceptually whether magic; the seemingly irrational phenomenon, is amenable in rational terms or not we find ourselves still lost in the puzzling dark alleys with no ray of light to guide us towards an outlet to this problem. Each path that was undertaken to find a way out, did lead us

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1. Gellner, E : (1962) Concepts and Society, Rationality Oxford, p - 46
  2. MacIntyre, A: (1969) A Mistake About Causality in the Social Sciences, Philosophy, Politics and Society, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. p - 61



convincingly a little way and then stopped short ~~to~~ <sup>of</sup> enlighten<sup>ing</sup> the problem in hand. Thus functionalism declares the rationale of magic to lie in its social function, " ....it asserts that each social institution is ideally suited to its content. " 1. Frazer announces the practitioners of magic to be doing science though rather crudely. He considered that "primitive man had reached his conclusion about the efficacy of magic from rational observation and deduction in much the same way as men of science reach their conclusions about natural laws. 2. Hence he shows them to be rational in method, purpose and form, though irrational in content. Beattie insists on magic being essentially symbolic and hence having its rationale in the appropriateness of the symbol to the value symbolized. Peter Winch advocated the view that so called irrational belief systems of primitive societies can be interpreted as rational in the light of the criterion of rationality to be discovered in the culture in which they occur.

A general survey of the various approaches discussed above has revealed their shortcomings. On my part I am favourably inclined towards the explanation

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1. Ernest Gellner : (1962) , p-20.

2. Frazer, J.G. : (1922), p-15.

offered in terms of situational logic. This explanation that takes into account the actions, aims, beliefs, knowledge of the situation in which the agent is placed. The problems that strike the social anthropologists can be rationally reconstructed in terms of the situational logic. Much of the fieldwork (as in anthropology) employs situational logic. To quote Jarvie's example

Assume an extremely intelligent Martian scientist had landed in the Bible Belt during a severe drought. While he was being conducted around by a distinguished scientist of earth he noticed that all the people of a town were crowded inside a hot, gloomy building. They alternately fell on their knees muttering to themselves and rose to the feet crying in unison. 'Why', asks the puzzled Martian 'are all these people behaving so peculiarly, so irrationally on such a hot day? Why do they waste their time when their crops are wilting in the fields? ... Don't they want crops?

The Earth scientist smiles tolerantly and explains that ... they all believe in and act on a theory that the world is the property, and under the exclusive control, of a Divine Being. They think that ultimately the drought is the work of the Divine Being and that the best... way of ending it is to implore it of the Divine Being; it is this they are doing in the building.<sup>1</sup>

The Martian now sees that the earthlings have intelligible ends (they want crops) and have acted rationally, faced with their situation, where 'their situation' includes their knowledge and beliefs.

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1. Jarvie, I.C. : (1964) The Revolution in Anthropology, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p-48.

Thus behaviour that seems to be irrational at first glance can be made perfectly intelligible later without attributing bizarre aims to the actors. The fact that we, with our modern scientific knowledge, can see that the actions prescribed by the explanation of the primitives will not bring about the promised end tells no more about these natives than that their knowledge is inadequate. We call it inadequate because it clashes with the 'rational' beliefs of modern science. But the native does not know of modern science and may not even believe it if he came to know about it. It would not be non-rational on his part not to have ever heard the arguments in favour of the scientific explanation. It would though surely be non-rational if, faced with all the arguments and able to appreciate their gravity the primitive still refused to accept that a western scientific explanation was any improvement on his own. Surely there is an element of criticism in magic where there is a choice of medicine. Evans Pritchard reports in his book on Azande that among them when a man wishes to acquire medicines for hunting elephants he makes inquiries to discover which magicians are themselves successful hunters. 1. This suggests that the means to achieve the desired end is chosen critically.

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1. See Pritchard, E.E.Evans : (1937) Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande, Oxford, p-444.

It also suggests how observations of the workings of superior medicines, improved farming techniques, fertilizers etc. may begin to upset a system if a culture of considerable technology and sophistication were to impinge on the primitive cultures.

Thus is it surely better not to bring into use the heavily value loaded term 'irrational' with its overtones of 'unreasonable' and 'bad'. Perhaps a better use of rational is to apply it to a purposeful behaviour. The magical practices in so far as they have a purpose to perform seem to me to be rational. The position I am inclined towards is that the ignorance of the savage is just as rational as civilised knowledge. For the explanation of human behaviour we should use a model of so called 'rational action' relative to a given situation. Action should be explained by means of assumptions about the actors' knowledge and beliefs including those about his situation, as well as his aims, from which that action can be shown to be directed towards the realization of that aim. Social anthropology may even be characterized as the attempt to make the behaviour of alien people intelligible by discovering the underlying situational logic. The only assumption the field worker can rely on as he does the reconstruction is that the behaviour of the people he is among can be rationally

explained and made intelligible by adopting the rationality principle. Situational logic, then is based on the rationality principle.

To keep up with the stand I wish to adopt, I shall be depending on Jarvie's arguments forwarded in his book 'Revolution in Anthropology'. His view is that magic and religion are to many people a part of common sense (common sense being an account of the knowledge, beliefs, aims in the purview of his information at that time) As a part of common sense it is reasonable for them to hold it. If another part of their common sense is an uncritical attitude towards belief, an acceptance of the received or traditional ideas, then their belief in common sense is reinforced and all the more rational. In our society (modern) superstition and elementary science are both present but part of our common sense in our society is the attitude of being critical towards traditional ideas. Once one becomes critical and establishes standards of being critical, then it is no longer reasonable to hold on to the more simple minded magical and religious beliefs in prayers and spells. This is the reason why we adopt the modern scientific attitude rather than magic, say, in the matter of medicine or farming. At the same time within his common sense and frame of reference the savage is also being

reasonable. Within both savage and civilised frames of reference it is possible to appraise the system of belief of the other, and a critical attitude towards belief and ideas is a better one far ahead than an uncritical attitude.

Thus, to conclude the way out to explaining human action, such as magic which at first sight seems to be irrational is not to try to explain it in some different way, not to apply different methods to an alien society from those we apply to our own society. Situational logic is the sole rational method of finding our way around in social life.

## CHAPTER III

### RATIONAL EXPLANATION and BUNGLED ACTIONS IN HISTORY

In this chapter which deals chiefly with the philosophy of history my concern, broadly, will be with the problem of the explanation of historical events. The focus of our discussion in this context however will be on bungled, unsuccessful actions in history. The issue here is a methodological one. That is, how the social scientist can study the <sup>h</sup>thoughts, utterances and actions of others, the minds of the people of a different historical period.

"What I want" says Mr. Gradgrind in Dicken's Hard Times, "is Facts...Facts alone are wanted in life." 1. First ascertain your facts say the positivists, then draw your conclusions from them.

First get your facts straight then plunge at your peril into the shifting sand of interpretation-that is the ultimate wisdom of the empirical common-sense school of history. 2

notes Carr.

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1. Dickens, Charles : (1949) Hard Times, London, p-2.

2. Carr, E.H.: (1964) What is History ? , NewYork, Alfred A. Knopf, p-7.

But here the question arises: how is one to interpret events that have occurred in the past and complete facts about which are not available ? Analogously, how are bungled actions, which failed to accomplish their aims to be explained ? Can they be explained ?

My major preoccupation, as indicated in initial paragraph is with the last two questions. The discussion in respect of the problem posed in the first question has only a supportive and secondary, though not unimportant role. There are two diametrically opposite standpoints in the context of bungled actions which are of direct relevance to the development of this chapter. We have on the one hand the view associated with Collingwood that bungled actions are not amenable to rational explanation. He is of the view that

We argue back from the solution to the problem. 1

As bungled actions stopped short in achieving their end they were not tractable as rational actions, and hence, were condemned by him as unexplainable. On the other

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1. Collingwood, R.G. : (1944) An Autobiography, Harmondsworth, p-50.

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hand we have the view associated with a host of thinkers that bungled actions are indeed amenable to rational explanation. John Watkins for instance, accepting ~~Popper's~~ Popper's rationality principle announces

The darker the region the more light may the principle spread...it...can be used to rationalize irrationality and failure. 1

Besides the two polar views a number of other solutions pertaining to the problem of explanation in history are also discussed. In what follows I shall bring into light the various controversial solutions and looking at it with a critical eye decide as to whether any one of them drives us at home satisfactorily.

A recent popular writer speaking of the achievements of science, refers graphically to the process of the human mind which

rummaging in the ragbag of observed 'facts' selects pieces, and patterns the relevant observed facts together rejecting the irrelevant until it has sown together a logical and rational quilt of 'knowledge'. 2

In a similar tone, E.H. Carr, a prominent

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1. Watkins, J : (1970) Imperfect Rationality, Explanation in the Behavioural Sciences, edi.R. Borger and F.Cioffi p-167.
  2. Leslie Paul : (1944) The Annihilation of Man, London Faber & Faber, p-147.

philosopher of history speaks of the task of a historian. A historian, according to him, distils from the experience of the past or from so much of the experience of the past as is accessible to him, that part which he recognizes as amenable to rational explanation and interpretation, and draws from it conclusions which may serve as a guide to action in the future. In this, thus following Talcott Parson's idea that history is a 'selective system' Carr holds, That the historian goes about his job like a scientist who interests himself with the discovery or formulation of causal sequences in the context of natural phenomena. He notes

Just as from the infinite ocean of facts the historian selects those which are significant for his purpose, so from the multiplicity of sequences of cause and effect he extracts those, and only those, which are historically significant and the standard of historical significance is his ability to fit them into his pattern of rational explanation and interpretation. Other sequences of cause and effect have to be rejected as accidental... because the sequence itself is irrevelant. The historian can do nothing with it; it is not amenable to rational interpretation, and has no meaning either for the past or the present. <sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, Carr distinguishes between rational and accidental causes. The former as they are potentially applicable to other countries, other periods and other

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1. Carr, E.H.: (1964), p-138.

conditions, lead to fruitful generalizations and lessons can be learned from them; they serve the end of broadening and deepening our understanding. Accidental causes according to him cannot be generalized; and, since they are in the fullest sense of the world unique, they teach no lessons and lead to no conclusions. Hence he rejects them as useless. Clearly, Carr brings in a normative element in his notion of rational explanation. According to him

...behind the search for causalities there always lies directly or indirectly ~~research~~ the search for values. 1

He defines the function of history as dual and reciprocal; that is to promote our understanding of the past in the light of the present and of the present in the light of the past.

Carr has given instances of a few accidents which are a series of events determined by chance, coincidences and attributable, only to the most casual causes such as the result of the battle of Actium was due not to the sort of causes commonly postulated by historians, but to Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra, the inability of Bajazet from marching into Central Europe by an attack of gout, the death of King Alexander of Greece from the

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1. Ibid, p-140.

bite of a pet monkey that touched off a train of events. Bringing into consideration these instances Carr notes,

...it makes no sense as a general proposition to say that generals lose battles because they are infatuated with beautiful queens, or that wars occur because kings keep pet monkeys... 1

The distinguishing feature of rational explanation in history, Carr believes is its purposive character, its usefulness in better organizing our future conduct. He writes

The faculty of reason is normally exercised for some purpose...human beings reason to an end. And when we recognized certain explanations as rational, and other explanations as not rational, we were, I suggest, distinguishing between explanations which served some end and explanations which did not. 2

Anything which like Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra's nose, fails to contribute to this dual purpose, is from the point of view of the historian dead and barren.

Carr does not raise the issue of the explanation of the bungled or failed actions of the past. However, considering his account of the nature of historical explanation, he is likely to adopt, it seems to me, a negative stance that such actions are not explainable.

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1. Ibid, p-138.

2. Ibid, p-140.

For if historical explanations, as Carr conceives, are causal in nature then unsuccessful actions pose unsurmountable problem in as much as their intended goal (effect) is not given to the historian. Study of causal sequence proceeds from effect to the cause but how would the historian get to know the objective of a failed action. The problem in the explanation of unsuccessful action is, first and foremost, the problem of determining or identifying the objective which they (unsuccessful actions) are actually meant to achieve but fail to achieve. Methodologically, Carr appears to be illequipped with this issue. In a way unsuccessful actions are like what Carr calls accidents in history, not helping much in the promotion of human understanding. Accordingly they are to be shrugged off as unamenable to rational explanation or as making no sense.

R.G. Collingwood an eminent British thinker, who too believes that unsuccessful or bungled actions of the past cannot be rationally explained, addresses the issue directly and focuses his attention to a conceptual aspect of the problem. Unsuccessful actions of the past are not amenable to any explanation precisely because they are unsuccessful. His argument is that since each action is an attempt to solve a certain problem that arises in a specific situation, a historian can explain

a past action only by the

renactment of past thought. 1

This is possible only if he is aware as to what problem it was meant to solve and the problem can be known only by arguing back from the solution. 2

In the case of unsuccessful action a reconstruction of the problem situation is not possible. Being a failed action, there is no way of knowing what problem it was meant to solve, what goal it was meant to achieve. Such actions, therefore, according to him, are not rationally explainable. To reproduce Watkins formulation of Collingwood's argument in this regard;

- (1) Every action is an attempt to solve a definite problem that has arisen in a definite situation.
- (2) A historian can explain a past action only if he knows what problem it was intended to solve.
- (3) A historian can come to know what problem a past action was intended to solve only by arguing back from the solution. 3

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1. Collingwood, R.G.: (1946) The Idea of History, London, Oxford, University Press, p- 315
  2. Collingwood, R.G.: (1944), p-8.
  3. Watkins, J : (1970) Explanation in the Behavioural Sciences, p-168.

Thus in his book An Autobiography Collingwood writes,

How can we discover what the tactical problem was that Nelson set himself at Trafalgar ? Only by studying the tactics he pursued in battle. We argue back from the solution to the problem. What else could we do. Even if we had the original type script of the coded orders issued by wireless to his captains a few hours before the battle began, this would not tell us that he had not changed his mind at the last moment, extemporised a new plan on seeing some new factors in the situation. Naval historians think it worthwhile to argue about Nelson's tactical plan at Trafalgar because he won the battle. It is not worthwhile arguing about Villeneuve's plan. He did not succeed in carrying it out and therefore no one will ever know what it was. 1

The question arises how is then man to fulfil his quest, his insatiable intellectual curiosity, his deep concern to know the world he lives in and to understand and explain the unending flow of events it presents.

Collingwood's point of view is most disagreeable because he excludes the possibility of independent evidence about what the problem was. As Watkins puts it forcefully,

Why on earth did Collingwood suppose that the only way to recover a problem is via its solution ? 2

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1. Collingwood, R.G.:(1944) , p.p.-50-51.

2. Watkins, J : (1970), p-169.

Collingwood's argument appears to backlash, for the difficulty that Collingwood points to, by suggesting that Nelson could have changed his mind even after having transmitted orders to his Captains, could arise even in the case of 'successful actions' for even in their context one could not be certain that the agent had not in fact changed his mind. And therefore what he succeeded in achieving was quite different from what he actually aimed at. This would mean that if Collingwood's argument is accepted then not only 'unsuccessful' actions cannot be rationally explained but even 'successful' actions cannot be explained. One cannot be sure of their being successful actions.

The two chief fields in which Collingwood worked were archaeology and history of ideas and it is true that an archaeologist usually has no documentary evidence. If he is trying to interpret the remains of some physical artifact he is likely to conjecture what its purpose was and what problem it designed to solve chiefly, on the basis of evidence supplied by the thing itself. A realistic conjecture is likely to be made only if the thing was well designed for its purpose. Thus archaeologists in their interpretations of the remains of artifacts have to assume that these constitute good answers to the problems they



were intended to meet. And this may have bent Collingwood towards the fact that problems past actions were supposed to solve can be known only by arguing back from the solution.

But an artifact that was well designed and constructed does not imply that it was successful. To borrow Watkin's example,

The Maginot Line was, I presume, well enough designed and constructed, engineering-wise, to enable an archaeologist of the future to guess its purpose. Collingwood's understanding of the Roman Wall was no doubt shrewd and realistic. But this ... does not imply that the Roman Wall successfully fulfilled its larger purpose : perhaps it was as unsuccessful as the Maginot Line. <sup>1</sup>

Now to comment on Collingwood's work on the history of ideas. Collingwood claimed that as a philosopher of the past was writing for people who were already asking the question that he was trying to answer and so he did not spell out the question in his writings. The student has to infer the problem from the solution of it that he is studying. Moreover Collingwood insisted he will be able to do this only if the solution in a philosophical work was successful. He was of the view that if a philosopher made,

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1. Watkins, J : Imperfect Rationality, (1970), p-169-170.

a complete mess of the job of solving his problem, he was bound at the same time to mix up his tracks so completely that no leader could see quite clearly what the problem had been... The fact that we can identify his problem is proof that he was solved it; for we know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution. 1

Collingwood usually speaks as though a philosopher addresses himself to one specific question at a time. But normally it is not the case that a philosopher faces just one outlined problem at a time. A philosopher may have been working within a developing problem-situation. At any one time he may have been distinctly aware of some of its chief features, vaguely aware of others and absolutely unaware of yet others. Hence, to gain a historical understanding of this philosopher's thought, a problem situation would have to be reconstructed and this can be done by a method of successive approximations. In this process though the philosophers own writings will provide important evidence, there will be more evidence outside his writings also.

A historian has certain advantages over the man whose problem situation he is trying to reconstruct. Though his distance from the intellectual scene may lead him to miss things yet with the benefit of hindsight he

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1. Collingwood, R.G.:(1944) , p-50.

may be able to recognize difficulties in the hero's problem situation which the hero did not perceive. And his capacity to enlighten the difference between the objective problem-situation and his hero's subjective appraisal of it may enable the historian to explain, how his hero came to accept, what was actually an improper solution which had to be discarded later. Thus the possibility of explaining unsuccessful actions is not closed as Collingwood had advocated.

Alan Donagan notes in his 'Comment' on Watkins's paper 'Imperfect Rationality' that

As an alternative to the pessimistic view of Collingwood's Autobiography Watkins, advocates what he calls an ~~autobiography~~ 'Imperfect Rationality' principle. <sup>e</sup>1

Watkins frames out the inconsistencies in Collingwood's arguments by noting

Indeed, his solution is, strictly speaking incoherent.. if one cannot understand ~~xxxp~~ a philosophical work unless one knows what problem it was a solution, and if one could come to know this only from an understanding of that solution then one could never get started. 2

Before going on to discuss Watkins stand in

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1. Donagan Alan :(1970) 'Comment' on 'Imperfect Rationality by Watkins, p-219.

2. Watkins, J :(1970), p-171.

detail we will look into some other views with regard to the nature of historical explanation. Although most of these views do not directly address themselves to the issue of the explanation of bungled and unsuccessful actions, their discussion nevertheless should contribute to an understanding of the issue.

According to a currently fashionable model-namely the hypothetico-deductive model, explanations given in all fields of inquiry including history have a common logical structure. Explanation it is said consists of the subsumption of what is to be explained under general laws. In Prof. Carl Hempel's words

...the assertion that a set of events-say of the kinds  $C_1, C_2, C_3, \dots C_n$  have caused the event (E) to be explained amounts to the statement that according to certain general laws, a set of events of the kinds mentioned is regularly accompanied by an event of kind (E). 1

This theory of explanation does not provide a satisfactory analysis of the kinds of answers historians usually offer to 'why' and 'how' questions. Previously questions as to the 'what' and 'why' of the

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1. Hempel, Carl : (1965) Explanatory Incompleteness, Readings in the Philosophy of Social Sciences, ed. May Broadbeck, p-398.

empirical world were often answered by myths; and to some extent this is so even in our times. But gradually the myths are displaced by the concepts, hypothesis and theories developed in the various branches of empirical science, including the natural sciences, psychological and sociological as well as the historical inquiry.

Whereas, in a natural science, we consider it reliable to put confidence in general propositions or laws than in specific phenomenon, this rule does not seem to operate successfully in history and the social sciences. The efficacy of the hypothetical deductive model in explaining social action is extremely doubtful for the reasons already discussed in the first chapter. Its application in the study of actions done in the past, including ones that have been unsuccessful, is even more so.

When a historian sets out to explain a historical action, his problem is usually that he does not know what reasons the agent applied. One model of explanation that is quite considerable in the explanation of an action in terms of the underlying rationale, which includes, in particular the ends the agent sought to attain and the alternative courses of action he believed to be open

to him and their probable efficacy as well as potential difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

This procedure becomes clear in the translation from the indulgence of the Cross to the institution of the jubilee indulgence,

...in the course<sup>5</sup> of the thirteenth century the idea of a Crusade more and more lost its power over mens spirits. If the Pope would keep open the important source of income which the indulgence represented they must invent new motives to attract people to the purchase of indulgences. It is the merit of Boniface VIII to have recognized this clearly. By creating the jubilee indulgence in 1300 he assured the species a further long development most welcome to the Papal finances. <sup>1</sup>

This passage clearly explains the establishment of the first jubilee indulgence by suggesting the reasons for which Boniface VIII took this step. If properly configured these reasons would include not only Boniface's objective of ensuring a continuation of the income so far derived from the indulgence of the Cross, but also his estimate of the relevant empirical e circumstances including the different courses of action open to him, and their probable efficacy as well as potential difficulties in pursuing them and adverse

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1. Boehmer, H : (1930) Luther and the Reformation  
Translated by E.S.G. Potter, London, p-91.

consequences to which they might lead.

Various reasons have been adduced in support of this view. For instance, Dray sets forth an important type of historical explanation which he calls 'rational explanation' i.e.

Explanation which displays the rationale of what was done. 1

Or rather in other words,

... a reconstruction of the agents calculation of means to be adopted towards his chosen end in the light of the circumstances in which he found himself. 2

The object of rational explanation is not to subsume the explanandum under general laws, but

to show that what was done was the thing to have been done for the reasons given, rather than merely the thing that is done on such occasions, perhaps in accordance with certain laws. 3

Hence a rational explanation has

an element of approval in it: it must exhibit what was done as appropriate or justified. 4

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(1,2,3,4). Dray, William : (1957) Laws and Explanation in History, Oxford, Chapter V,

Accordingly Dray conceives a rational explanation (mention of which has been briefly made in ~~the~~ Chapter 1) as being based on a standard of appropriateness or of rationality of a special kind which he calls a 'principle of action' i.e. a judgement of the form : when in a situation of type  $C_1, C_2 \dots C_n$  the thing to do is X. Dray's conception of a rational explanation thus answers a question of the form 'why did the agent A do X ?' by offering an explanans of the type :

A was in a situation of type C  
In a situation of type C the appropriate thing to do is X.

Our concern here is to see whether or not this model can be used in the understanding of bungled or unsuccessful actions. Since the objective of the action in the context of unsuccessful actions itself is not known exactly, the appropriateness of an unsuccessful action in no way can be decided, because though it shows what the appropriate thing to do was yet it does not explain A's having in fact done X and hence the action remains unexplained. In any adequate explanation of an empirical phenomenon the explanans must provide good grounds for believing or asserting that the explanandum

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1. Dray, William : (1957),



phenomenon did in fact occur. This requirement is not met by a rational explanation as concerned by Dray for it does not explain what it is meant to explain i.e. that which has actually been done.

Carl Hempel goes a step ahead and modifies the form of the explanans. According to him to explain why A did X

...we have to refer to the underlying rationale not by means of a normative principle of action, but by descriptive statements to the effect that, at the time in question... A had the disposition to act rationally; and that a rational agent, when in circumstances of kind C will always ... do X. 1

According to Hempel even if it be conceded that it would be reasonable to do what the agent did, given that he had certain beliefs and purposes, it does not follow that the agent acted reasonably. He may have done what he did as a result of thinking which was slip shod or even logically absurd. Hence Hempel argued that a Dravian 'rational explanation' requires a further assumption : that the agent was rational when he acted.

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1. Hempel, Carl : (1962) Explanation in Science and In History, Frontiers of Science and Philosophy, Pittsburgh, edi. R.G. Colodny, p-29.

If Hempel is right the full schema of the Dravian rational explanation would be as Hempel himself arranges it

A was in a situation of type C  
A was a rational agent  
In a situation of type C a rational agent will do X

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Therefore, A did X . 1

Despite the addition of the premiss that the agent is a rational agent, Hempelian revision can in no way throw any light on unsuccessful actions, for the same reason that the problem with regard to unsuccessful actions is precisely the problem of identifying the purpose or goal of that action. There is no criterion of rationality which uniquely singles out one course of action as 'the thing to do'. There are a several other courses of action open to the agent in the same set of circumstances and he is at liberty to choose any . Besides there is no reason to believe that all historical agents are rational in any of the several senses of 'rational' that may be proposed. Hence this model too cannot be sensibly applied to unsuccessful actions.

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1. Hempel, C.G. :(1962) Rational Action, Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. XXXV, p-12.

Popper throws light on a new possibility altogether. He has drawn attention to the kind of explanation historians often succeed in establishing. He announces,

Our actions are to a very large extent explicable in terms of the situation in which they occur. 1

He however adds

They are never fully explicable in terms of the situation alone; an explanation of the way in which a man, when crossing a street, dodges the cars which move on it may go beyond the situation, and may refer to his motives, to an instinct of self-preservation, or to his wish to avoid pain, etc. But this psychological part of the explanation is very often trivial, as compared with the detailed determination of his action by what we may call the logic of the situation. 2

While what Popper calls the psychological part of such explanations is often trivial, I would give great significance to it and not call it trivial in the sense, as Popper has done so, as 'unimportant' and 'obvious'. The information that a man in traffic seeks to avoid injury and act to commit suicide is indispensable, even if it is often obvious in explaining the way he moves.

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1. Popper, K.R. : (1957) The Open Society and its Enemies, 3rd edition, London, p-17

2. Ibid, p- 18

The psychological part of any explanation contains no covering law and is not based on any universal hypothesis whatever, in this way being unique as an explanation of the social sciences. The information that this man seeks to avoid injury or that man to commit suicide, or yet another to sustain a minor injury in order to obtain damages, is in no case a universal hypothesis. Thus, though I abide by Popper's method of situational logic I do not accept his thesis of universal laws, which unifies the two sciences.

~~These findings indicate that the method of~~  
~~analyzing situations is not based on any assumptions~~  
~~concerning the psychological aspect of motivation or~~  
~~otherwise of human behavior. The nature of the explanation~~  
~~according to this model is as follows :~~

~~A case is used to explain the act of an individual~~  
~~A given situation is as a~~  
~~A person acts in a given way is explained in a situation~~  
~~Therefore, A acts in a given way.~~

~~This model shows, that the psychological~~  
~~aspect is not a part of the explanation but 'situation'~~  
~~that is not a part of the explanation in any way at all.~~  
~~concerning the human behavior has been, as indicated~~

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~~method~~

would be in a degraded state of reasoning and that the only way to improve it is to adopt the only attitude he may possess to understanding some rational.

Popper uses rationalism in order to indicate roughly an attitude that seeks to solve as many problems as possible by an appeal to reason, i.e. to clear thought and experience, rather than by an appeal to emotions and passions. It is a practical attitude of readings to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience. It is basically an attitude of admitting that

I may be wrong and you may be right and by an effort we may get nearer to the truth. 1

In his article 'Rationality and the Status of the Rationality Principle', Popper gives a lucid elaboration of 'Rationality' as

a personal attitude of readiness to correct ones' belief. In its intellectually most highly developed form it is the readiness to discuss ones' beliefs critically and to correct them in the light of critical discussions with other people. 2

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1. Popper, K.R.:(1957) Open Society and its Enemies, vol.I. p-225.

2. Popper, K.R.: Rationality and the Status of Rationalit Principle (unpublished)

Tom Settle comes ~~flows~~ close to Popper's view on rationality when he says in his article 'The Rationality of Magic versus the Rationality of Science', that it is a critical attitude. According to him, being rational is having ones decisions and actions which are based on his knowledge and beliefs directed towards specific goals only after a critical consideration.

Popper defines his rationality principle as a minimum principle (since it assumes no more than the adequacy of our actions to our problem-situations as we see them) which animates almost all our explanatory situational modes, and which, although we know that it is not true, we have some reason to regard as a good approximation. 1

Karl Popper's most powerful yet simple philosophical ideas is the notion of the logic of the situation with the help of which one can sort out a great many issues in the methodology of the social sciences. The idea is that

situational logic is the explanation of human behaviour as an attempt to achieve goals or aims within limited means. 2

A man for the purposes of the social sciences

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1. Popper, K.R.: Rationality and the Status of Rationality Principle
  2. Jarvie : (1972) Concepts and Society, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, p-5.

can be viewed as in pursuit of certain goals or aims, within a framework of social, psychological, natural and etnical circumstances. These circumstances constitute both means of achieving his aims and constraints on those achievements. A mans appraisal of how he can achieve his aims within these circumstances might be called sorting out the logic of the situation. He is in 'logic' because he tries to find out the best and most effective means within the situation, to realize his aims. It is assumed that the situation if objectively appraised should favour certain means which are more effective than others and that the measure of rationality consists in the success in approaching such an 'objective' appraisal. Under situational analysis typical situational elements such as 'aims' and 'knowledge' are brought under consideration and an assumption is made that the various persons or agents involved act adequately or appropriately: that is to say in accordance with the situation. The term situation, already contains all the relevant aims and all the available relevant knowledge, especially that of possible means for realizing these aims.

Popper regards the principle of adequacy of actio

as an integral part for every or nearly every testable social theory. But here the question arises as to how can the principle of adequacy of action be applied to inadequate actions. To quote Popper's own example, Churchill in 'The World Crisis' said that

wars are not won but only lost-that in effect they are competitions in incompetence. 1

This provides us with a situation which is not animated by the rationality principle of adequacy of our actions but by a principle of inadequacy.

Popper claims that in order to understand inadequate actions

We have to reconstruct a wider view of the situation than their own. 2

This should be done in such a manner that we may be able to perceive how and why they saw the situation as they did

with their limited experience, their limited or overblown aims, their limited or overexcited imagination. 3

Thus by hind sight and applying the Rationality Principle the principle of adequacy of action, unsuccessful,

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(1,2,3). Popper, K.R.: Rationality and the Status of the Rationality Principle.



bungled or inadequate actions can be explained.

At this point it will be most appropriate and useful to introduce a variant of Popper's Rationality Principle, namely 'the imperfect rationality principle' which has been advanced and defended by John Watkins and which I am inclined to accept. This principle is specifically put forward by its author to account for those unsuccessful or seemingly irrational even crazy actions in which the history of mankind abounds and which are far more challenging from the viewpoint of explanation than the staid and orderly actions of 'normal' people.

Watkins strongly disagrees with Collingwood for according to him the 'irrational' is amenable in rational terms. Advocating the rationality principle Watkins says,

I hold that a rationality principle is likely to be at its most heuristically fruitful when it is applied determinedly to recalcitrant cases-to actions that are manifestly unsuccessful and seem more or less irrational or even downright crazy. 1

He goes to the extent of saying that,

The darker the region the more light may the principle spread. 2

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1. Watkins, J : (1970), p-167.

2. Ibid, p-167.

He claims it can be used to rationalize irrationality and failure.

To elaborate on Watkins methodological device, The rationality principle says that when an individual is placed in a certain objective problem situation he has certain aims, wants, preferences and he draws factual estimate (which may even be a false estimate) of his problem situation and then acts in a way that is 'appropriate' to his aims and the appraisal of the situatio

There is a pure or extreme version of the principle that identifies rational decision making with optimal decisional making; a decision which could not be bettered and any other alternative ~~was~~ to it would be less good. However, Watkins does not favour the optimal decision making. It involves, according to him, outrageously optimistic assumptions about our capacity for self-knowledge, especially when risks and uncertainties are introduced. Thus it does not serve even as a normative principle.

By 'decision scheme' Watkins means

a set of all those considerations, whether consciously formulated or not, that enter into a particular piece of decision making. <sup>1</sup>

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1. Ibid, p-206.

He says further,

it should consist of a complete specification of the possible outcomes, a complete preference-map or a complete allocation of pay of values to the outcomes, and (where appropriate) a comprehensive apparatus for dealing with risks and uncertainties. 1

The actual decision scheme is fragmentary as compared with the ideal. But the agent will usually reduce and simplify it further as he proceeds towards a decision. Instead of a complete enumeration of possibilities demanded by normative theory, we pick out a few interesting possibilities in the given problem situation. In this respect, therefore, it is exaggerated.

As Watkins notes

An actual decision scheme, then, is something like a crude caricature, drawn with a few bold strokes, of the complete situational picture and preference map of normative decision-theory. 2

But, Watkins also points out that a few decisions are made so rapidly that there is hardly time for the decision maker to articulate to himself even a part of his decision scheme let alone the complete decision scheme. Moreover, it is even logically impossible that a decision scheme should be fully articulated, for every proposition has

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1. Ibid, p-206.

2. Ibid, p-208.

several logical consequences. This also means that a decision scheme has many unnoticed implications and if a decision maker overlooks a serious implication in the decision scheme he goes astray from a very different practical conclusion. X

Now, as a matter of psychological fact, we are more curious about unsuccessful actions/rather than successful actions. Watkins is of the view that the simplest way to provide explanation to an action ending in failure would be that, the main components of the agent's decision scheme have been ascertained to the historians satisfaction; these point pretty unambiguously to a certain practical conclusion; the action in question was in line with that conclusion; but there is a significant discrepancy between the situational appraisal contained in the agents decision scheme and the agent's objective problem situation (both as reconstructed by the historian) and the failure of the action can be explained in terms of this discrepancy.

To augment his position, Watkins applies the imperfect rationality principle to study the case, where the principal actor died during the performance, and left no direct testimony of any kind. This is the case of

the British Vice Admiral Tryon who in 1893, ordered two parallel columns of ships to turn in on each, even though they were so close that they made collusion inevitable unless one column turned inside the other. A collusion occurred despite the quering of the order by the leading ship in the other column, and the Admiral went down with his ship having signalled that rescue boats were not to be launched by the other ships. Until recently Tryon's behaviour at the climax of a brilliant career, had been regarded as inexplicable, mad or drunken. Watkins, however, basing himself on Hough, shows how if the attempt is made to reconstruct the problem situation as Tryon saw it, and as it developed step by step, his planned manoeuvre is easily explained, as are his orders about the boats and his last comment "it was all my fault." The story seems to be this that the two lines of ships were approaching shallow water. Tryon ordered the inward turns and that the order of the fleet be preserved. This latter implied that the columns were to turn one inside the other. But which ? The rule of the road at sea is that ships pass port side to port side. After hesitating and querying the order Rear-Admiral Markham leading his column in H.M.S. Camperdown executed hard-a-starboard trying to turn inside Tryon's column

according to the rule of the road instead of outside, as he should have, when he saw Tryon had the Victoria hard-a-port since it was a Queen's regulation that in collision situation, the ship which has the other on her starboard side is to make the avoidance manoeuvre despite the attempts to manoeuvre Camperdown rammed Victoria. Tryon then apparently tried to run his ship aground, for when it suddenly sank, the engine were going full tilt, causing further loss of life but explaining why he ordered no boats lowered. But if Tryon was waiting for the other column to turn wide before beginning his own hard turn inside them their incompetence was to blame. Why then did he say 'It was all my fault ?' His apparent acceptance of responsibility Watkins agrees is a classic case of an officer taking responsibility for the error of a subordinate. Watkins sums all up by saying that here was a clear attempt to achieve something which failed, and yet which is entirely satisfactorily explained without adhoc hypothesis of sudden madness or undetectable drunkenness.

But how are those ~~one~~ actions to be interpreted, one may ask, which not only ended in failure but the main components of which as understood by the historian did not point to a desired practical conclusion.

corresponding to the action in question. How are those actions to be understood which seem not just unsuccessful but downright irrational and crazy. To this Watkins answers

Our imperfect rationality principle enjoins the historian not to throw up his hands and declare that the agent must have taken leave of his senses... the historian would try to transform a case of this sort into a case of a previous sort where the agent though frustrated or defeated by objective factors, acted reasonably enough given his misappraisal of his situation.<sup>1</sup>

Watkins concedes that by

the kind of methodological rule I was adumbrating... he succeeded in rationalizing... irrational seeming affair.<sup>2</sup>

Often a view was set out that history of ideas, is a caricature of its own rational reconstruction. Rational reconstruction of the history of ideas, according to them signifies more than the real history as it is the essence of history, very different from reality and almost a distortion of reality. To this Imre Lakatos observes that rational reconstruction should not be over thrown for it condones that distortion. Historians of ideas ignore blind alleys and pass, quickly over dull periods and center on exciting ones and get 'instant rationality'.

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1. Ibid, p.210.

2. Ibid, p.215.

This is justified since thinkers work hard in order to achieve, just the very rational story that the one who reconstructs it is after. It is a fact that intellectual autobiographies are usually more reconstructed than intellectual biographies and one can hardly call this lies. Thus Lakatos justifies rational reconstruction and in effect fortifies Watkins position in this regard.

Hence to conclude we find that Watkins has presented a workable solution which satisfies our curiosity to know phenomena which at first sight seems to be irrational. Such a reconstruction, as Watkins himself significantly observes, is not only historically enlightening but humanizing as well.

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(The example of sea-battle has been taken from John Watkins' paper Imperfect Rationality, who in turn has taken it from Admirals in Collussion by Richard Hough.)



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